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SUBJECT: THE EVOLVING NATURE OF VIETNAM'S CIVIL SOCIETY

Ref: A) Hanoi 06; B) HANOI 02

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Summary  
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¶1. (SBU) A Vietnam Institute of Development Studies (VIDS) study concluded that the structure of civil society in Vietnam is broad-based, with many different types of organizations, associations and groups operating in the country. Most of these organizations work at providing services to the poor and disadvantaged. The VIDS study and our contacts assess that civil society's impact in influencing public policies on human rights, social policy and national budgeting, and in holding the state and private sectors accountable, is "very limited." The role of the six Communist Party-affiliated mass organizations in Vietnam has evolved in that they now are drafting laws and are doing a better job of representing the interests of people at the grassroots level, our contacts say. The GVN has started to have some "positive views" about civil society, although experts continue to question GVN intentions toward it. The GVN wants more "safe" groups to take on social tasks that it cannot. At the same time, however, the GVN wants to prevent groups from becoming more politically active. GVN leaders likely will continue to move cautiously in granting civil society "more space." End Summary.

Assessing Civil Society  
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¶2. (SBU) Experts at the Vietnam Institute of Development Studies (VIDS), a member of the Communist Party-affiliated Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA), recently published an exhaustive study of civil society in Vietnam. The World Alliance for Citizen Participation, an international non-governmental organization (NGO), developed the approach and methodology for this study. VIDS experts looked at 74 indicators related to the structure, values and impact of civil society, as well as the socioeconomic environment in which it operates. The study concluded that the structure of civil society is broad-based, with many different types of organizations, associations and groups operating here. Most of these organizations work at providing services to the poor and disadvantaged. Structural weaknesses include a "lack of strategies and weak umbrella organizations and networks." As for values, the VIDS study concluded that civil society practices and promotes positive values "to a moderate extent." The most important values are poverty alleviation and non-violence. A major civil society weakness in the values area includes "minimal efforts" by people "to promote transparency and democracy within their organizations."

¶3. (SBU) The VIDS study assessed that civil society's impact in influencing public policies on human rights, social policy and

national budgeting, and in holding the State and private sectors accountable, is "very limited." However, the study said that civil society's efforts at meeting societal needs are at a "medium level."

Civil society has done well in informing and educating people, empowering women and supporting people's livelihoods. As for the socio-economic environment, the VIDS study concluded that civil society, given the GVN's "management" of NGOs, is operating in a "slightly disabling environment."

#### Civil Society in the Vietnamese Context

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¶4. (SBU) Civil society is segmented into various organizations with different functions, Oxfam Great Britain Coordinator Le Hoa and law professor Hoang Ngoc Giao explained. Despite their affiliation with the Communist Party, the "old" mass organizations and professional associations are broadly accepted as an integrated part of civil society. The Communist Party-affiliated mass organizations are: the Women's Union, Farmer's Association, Trade Union, Youth Union, Veteran's Association and Fatherland Front. Among the larger professional associations are VUSTA and the Vietnam Union of Arts and Literature. The "new" types of organizations (which began to appear in the early 1990's, but are "not yet fully recognized" by society) are NGO's, community-based organizations (CBO's) and other types of informal organizations.

¶5. (SBU) According to participants in the VIDS study and our contacts, the term civil society until recently had a "negative connotation" in Vietnam. Just three or four years ago, people avoided mention of the term because it was "sensitive," Hoa and Giao told Poloff. Why we can now discuss civil society defies simple explanations, Hoa said. It is a function of educating GVN leaders, growth in civil society-like organizations, the push from donors and other variables, she asserted. For his part, Giao said that some politicians have concluded that the GVN must grant civil society more space or risk damage to its legitimacy.

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¶6. (SBU) 74 percent of the Vietnamese population belongs to at least one organization (including the mass organizations), according to UN Development Program (UNDP) statistics. However, not all Vietnamese organizations are deeply anchored in civil society, the VIDS study showed. For example, some members of mass organizations are also public sector employees.

#### A Matter of Language

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¶7. (SBU) In Vietnamese, two expressions are commonly used to refer to civil society: "xa hoi cong dan" and "xa hoi dan su." "Xa hoi cong dan" means "citizens." "Xa hoi" denotes society; "cong" means public (as opposed to family and private); and, "dan" means people. "Xa hoi dan su," mean while, literally translates to civil society. According to the VIDS study, the debate about language is important in that "civil" is not a clear term in Vietnamese because it indicates what it is not (i.e., it is not related to military activities), but does not say much about what it is. Both expressions are used, but "xa hoi dan su" is more common, probably because it is the literal translation of the English term.

¶8. (SBU) The Vietnamese term for NGOs refers to organizations "external" to the State. Until just a couple of years ago, the term was not used because external organization activity was associated with "anti-State" behavior, rather than positive or necessary activities, our contacts explained. Today, the term has generally been accepted as an "imported" term used to designate certain types of organizations.

¶9. (SBU) Today, "civic organization" is the usual concept used in discussing organizational life in Vietnam, according to Bui The Cuong, a Vietnamese academic. These civic organizations collectively constitute "a civil society." For their part, VIDS study participants concluded that a "broader understanding of civil society is not yet fully part of mainstream political thinking." However, new ideas are being formulated about civil society and its

organizations are increasingly perceived "as not just passive followers," they added.

#### Mass Organizations' Evolving Role

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¶10. (SBU) Oxfam's Hoa told Poloff that experts continue to debate whether the six mass organizations constitute part of Vietnam's growing civil society. These mass organizations, some of which have millions of members, have a dual mandate, she explained. On the one hand, they disseminate Party lines and policies to their members and are tightly linked to the Party by means of Central Committee members in their key leadership posts and "Party groups" within their respective executive committees.

¶11. (SBU) On the other hand, mass organizations represent their members and often lobby the GVN on their members' behalf, Hoa continued. At the grassroots level, the mass organizations are "close to the people" and thus do a good job of "representing their interests," she said. A mass organization chairperson can bring local problems to the attention of local Party leaders. Mass organizations also provide social services at local levels; for example, the Women's Union provides credits to women to start up businesses and has been somewhat active in combating trafficking-in-persons.

¶12. (SBU) Civil society experts have concluded that mass organizations have brought about "positive results" by increasing citizen participation at the local level, Hoa added. International NGOs such as Oxfam are working more with the mass organizations in providing social services. "Most donors see potential advantage to working at the grassroots levels with the mass organizations," she offered. For his part, Giao said civil society and mass organization groups operating at the commune levels have experienced less Party interference because the Party has fewer resources at that level. Local Party affiliates need these groups to carry out social work and have for the most part left them alone, he added.

¶13. (SBU) Mass organizations are increasingly involved in the legislative process, Hoa and Giao explained. The Women's Union, for example, drafted last year's Law on Gender Equality (LGE) (Ref A). Giao said two main factors are driving this trend: 1) the GVN is responding to international donors pushing for more civil society involvement in legislative processes; and, 2) mass organization leaders want their organizations involved. Giao criticized the LGE, however, "because it did not define what the problems to be addressed are." The Women's Union and GVN drafted the law for the sake of making a law, but not for solving problems, he asserted. He said it is "good" that the mass organizations are drafting laws, but that their legal capabilities need to be upgraded.

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#### GVN Adapting To New Realities

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¶14. (SBU) The GVN has started to have some "positive views" about civil society, although experts continue to question how "sincere" it is, Hoa said. She has observed some positive changes. For example, the GVN used to develop its five year Social and Economic Development Program internally, but now it consults donors and NGOs because it "seems to recognize the benefit" of their participation. While civil society's impact is still limited, and the process is not entirely open, it is significant that the GVN calls for comment, she added.

¶15. (SBU) Over the past three years, the GVN has begun to adapt its laws and policies to meet "the new situation." In 2003, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) issued a decree that has served as the basis for the ever evolving legal framework for organizations; this 2003 decree replaced a 1957 decree on organizations. The GVN's 2002 Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy, which the GVN formulated in cooperation with the donor community, was one of the first development documents to mention the role of NGO's in Vietnam's overall socioeconomic development.

¶16. (SBU) On the current version of the draft Law on Associations (LOA), civil society groups lobbied successfully for changes to it. They have argued that this law should be a legal document "not for managing people, but for facilitating development," Hoa and Giao said. (Note: the National Assembly has yet to see the latest version of the LOA reportedly because Party power brokers are worried about its political and security implications (Ref B). The current version of the LOA would make it easier for Vietnamese to form organizations. End Note.)

¶17. (SBU) In addition, the GVN will "soon" issue a decree governing the operations of CBO's, Hoa said. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) developed the decree, but MARD officials consulted outside groups, such as Oxfam, in drafting it. At the beginning, MARD officials seemed to share the views of Oxfam and other NGO's, Hoa stated. Civil society experts are anxious to see if the final decree will "facilitate" CBO operations, she said.

Comment  
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¶18. (SBU) Because of the overlap between State, Party and civil society, much of the change in Vietnam's civil society has taken place within the State sphere. However, more groups operating outside, or on the outskirts of, the State have cropped up in recent years, thus presenting GVN leaders with a dilemma. GVN leaders clearly want more "safe" groups to take on more of the social tasks that the government cannot. However, at the same time, the GVN has yet to demonstrate a willingness to "unleash" civil society. We probably can expect, at best, that GVN leaders will continue to move cautiously in granting civil society more space. End Comment.

MARINE